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ABSTRACT

To better serve the diverse and complex needs of the parliamentarian, parliamentary libraries are transferring the emphasis of their activities from collection building to the provision of increasingly more costly library services. Parliamentary libraries must accept that information prepared for members of parliament is more differentiated and individualized than in the past and that the librarian's role as custodian is evolving into that of a highly specialized consultant whose ability as a subject specialist and intermediary to information is a paramount asset. Parliamentary libraries must also maintain their status as a service to the parliament as an institution, at the same time serving the goals of the institution, while serving individual interests which at any given instance may be in conflict. These requirements call for flexibility and innovation in library management, posing a formidable task for the library administrator. At this time, a worthwhile initiative for IFLA's section for Parliamentary and Administrative Libraries would be a comparative study aimed at evolving a theory of parliamentary librarianship offering practical guidance for the management of these libraries. (RAA)

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Some Aspects of Parliamentary Librarianship

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SOME ASPECTS OF PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARIANSHIP

Russell L. COPE

The unprecedented changes which have so altered our lives and values since the end of the last war, show no sign of slowing up. They are maintaining a momentum which has begun to affect even the most conservative institutions, including our Parliaments. Whilst the parliamentary institution has only just started, sometimes with reluctance, to see the need for internal changes to make it more effective and relevant to a vastly different world, parliamentarians have through their contact with their electorates long been aware of the full force of social ferment, the effects of technological development with all its problematic aspects, and the volatility and clash of ideas, values and mores. These are the realities which the electorate knows and reflects, and these are the realities to which parliamentarians and political parties must speedily respond. The member of Parliament's job is consequently growing more complex than it was a few decades ago; no one expects that it will become easier in the future. Nowadays parliamentarians are much more vulnerable in their professional needs than their predecessors ever were: Members must, for example, be able to react speedily to complex, sometimes very technical issues because of their increased exposure to the media, especially the almost instantaneous interview on television. Since Members must rely heavily on publicity for contact with the electorate, they cannot escape the dilemma of being accessible to the media for the media's own purposes.

The changes in the role of the parliamentarian has had a marked effect on the parliamentary libraries. In earlier decades the parliamentary libraries did not have any great need to be innovative, and many of them simply reflected the strongly conservative nature of the parliamentary institution where change was not and still is not, a notable characteristic. The parliamentary libraries have, however, been forced

to re-assess themselves in the light of the changing needs of their clientele, and, of course, in the light of the problems created by the 'information explosion'. It should also be mentioned that Members have not been slow in encouraging their libraries to undergo a transformation

The resources which are required to make parliamentary libraries effective in terms of Members' perceived needs in a rapidly changing world, are large. If the libraries are to plan (as they should) beyond the immediately pressing needs, their claim for even larger resources will be inevitable. As soon as Members had begun to see value in promoting library and information services within the legislature, a much larger share of available resources was received, but at the cost in some cases of disturbing the established bureaucratic hierarchies and procedures which have existed between the various branches of the legislative establishment. The parliamentary institution as a whole has indeed shown itself not able to react to, and plan for, change as readily as the parliamentary libraries have succeeded in doing. It is now generally recognised that the provision of an effective library and information service designed to cater for the full range of Members' known and developing interests, is a very costly business. Information is a costly resource to acquire and process; it becomes even more costly, if it is to be processed speedily and presented in forms adapted to the differing needs of individual users or groups of users such as committees and party organs. If further refinements, such as providing some degree of assessment or analysis, or even a consultative or briefing service, are required, the expense becomes quite considerable. The parliamentary library also becomes an extremely complex organisation whose managerial problems are very taxing.

By transferring the emphasis of their activity from collection-building to the provision of information services which must evolve in response to the varied and changing needs of Members, the parliamentary libraries find themselves obliged to analyse rigorously their organisation and methods, the institution they serve, and above all their clientele. And, of course, the rather mercurial term "information" has to be scrutinised and repeatedly re-assessed in the light of experience and

changing needs. The nature of the modern parliamentarian's calling offers a great challenge to an information service, for the parliamentarian, as a professional politician, unites widely varying individual qualities with other characteristics shared with fellow parliamentarians. Each Member has a unique background, and necessarily represents an electorate which may differ demographically, socially, economically and geographically from most of the others. Members may also have political and party needs which are not necessarily the same as their parliamentary needs. Their individual needs are thus sometimes quite distinct from their collective needs as members of an identifiable political party. At any one time a Member may have multiple information needs, but they will be of variable depth and quality according to the specific issue. Generally speaking, most information needs are acute as far as meeting deadlines is concerned. Needs will also vary over time. Another important distinction should be made between "reactive" needs, that is, the needs arising from their reaction to events and issues as they occur, and between continuing needs of a more substantive "monitoring" kind, such as the need for continuously updated data on particular subjects of long-range interest to them personally or politically.

The parliamentary libraries must now accept that the form in which information is prepared for the use of Members should be much more differentiated and individualised than it has been in the past. In some cases Members require something akin to a "consultancy" service on the information they seek: the Member may not even fully understand his own information needs in some circumstances, and he may need guidance on the interpretation of the information which is prepared for him. The more a parliamentary library strives to offer an information service of depth and reliability, the greater the tendency will become for the library to serve not only as an information resource, but also as an intermediary between the client and the information itself. This is especially the case in technical or legal areas where the Member may be quite inexperienced. The parliamentary libraries may consequently find themselves obliged to go beyond being expert in the acquisition and presentation of information, to become specialists in the understanding, the interpretation and exposition of information. Already the libraries of some of the great

national legislatures employ subject specialists to achieve this aim.

Another difficulty which besets the parliamentary libraries is their awareness that Members have many other collateral sources of information available to them apart from their own library. This difficulty is variable and should not be overstressed, but neither should it be overlooked, since it can create strains in parliamentary libraries without very considerable resources at their command.

Apart from meeting the needs of Members individually and collectively, the parliamentary libraries have a responsibility to the parliamentary institution as an entity. The institution continues whereas its Members change, and the parliamentary libraries need to keep in mind the wider perspectives of the institution which may on occasion not coincide exactly with the views of individual Members or groups of them. This wider perspective will assist the parliamentary libraries to maintain standards of impartiality and confidentiality in their dealings with Members and political parties. Unless the libraries have earned and retained such a reputation, their function is flawed, and the parliamentary institution itself damaged.

The managerial problems besetting an evolving information service in the volatile parliamentary environment scarcely need elaboration. It seems unfortunately unavoidable that an information service catering for such diverse and rapidly changing needs creates centrifugal tendencies in some of its branches. The larger such a service becomes, the easier it is for overall co-ordination and control to be lost. If the libraries fail to ensure integration of the different categories of staff, a spirit of unfruitful competitiveness or rivalry may arise imperceptibly and become hard to eradicate. A further challenge to management lies in maintaining the flexibility necessary for the experimentation (and possible failure) which the open-ended nature of the concept of "information" implies. The age-old conflict between stability of an established system - which has become established because it has proved effective - and pressures for innovation and renewal which may upset the traditional framework, will arise periodically. It may well be doubted whether many library systems are subject to the multiple variables confronting the parliamentary

libraries to-day. The training required for the library personnel to master these variables comes mostly in the form of experience on the job and not from any formal instruction. Where formal instruction, particularly in management techniques and theories, is available, it does not appear very relevant to the majority of (medium-sized) parliamentary libraries. For this reason it seems that the parliamentary libraries can best assist themselves by the freest exchange of experience and ideas which they have gathered in the real working environment. Personal contacts and inspection of one another's services are also important and often most rewarding.

It seems evident that both the theory and practice of parliamentary librarianship is at present undergoing considerable change. These changes seem to be occurring all over the world, but there are, of course, many individual differences in the rate and quality of change. It would be presumptuous to generalise any further on the issues which have been briefly sketched above: the time is, however, fast approaching for a detailed exposition of the implications of a legislative information service conforming, for example, with the parameters suggested above. Such an exposition could be profitably based on comparison of existing services and ideas. The data for this survey are unfortunately scattered and incomplete, but these deficiencies could be overcome by energetic and enthusiastic research. The parliamentary libraries, differing as they do in historical and political terms across many geographical frontiers, have, however, many points of contact and similarity of aims and problems. A comparative survey aimed at evolving a theory of parliamentary librarianship, and offering some practical guidance on the management of these libraries, seems an ideal well worth the initiative of IFLA's Section for Parliamentary and Administrative Libraries.